

## **Public Education in South Carolina Leader Perceptions Survey**

**December 2001**

South Carolina's Education Accountability Act was passed in 1998. Since that time, the Education Oversight Committee (EOC) has established a number of objectives and standards to evaluate and monitor progress toward the overall goal of improved education in the state. In addition, they have aggressively promoted community, business, parental, and educator involvement through a variety of communications, activities, and events.

The purpose of this study is to assess awareness and impact of these EOC activities and events among school, business, community, and religious leaders throughout the state. In addition, the study provides general insight on perceptions of education in South Carolina; awareness of and support for the EAA, the EOC and its direction; and expectations relative to achieving objectives.

Data for this study were collected via a mail survey. Questionnaires were mailed to 3,500 leaders from a list provided by the EOC. Overall, 1,106 questionnaires were returned, for a return rate of approximately 32%. Sampling error for the study is  $\pm 2.9\%$  at the 95 percent confidence level.

### **Overview**

Overall, findings clearly identify support among the state's business, education, and community leaders for improving public education in South Carolina. Most give the schools only moderate ratings and identify ample opportunities for improvement.

Leaders are not, however, putting all responsibility for improvement on the schools and educators themselves. Most feel that schools are already called on to do too much

and recognize that, to be effective, the effort must reflect a unified commitment among educators, students, parents, government leaders, businesses, religious leaders, and the community as a whole.

Accountability is viewed as a key component of improvement. The goals of the EAA in this regard and the efforts of the EOC to heighten awareness and build involvement among the various segments generate favorable support.

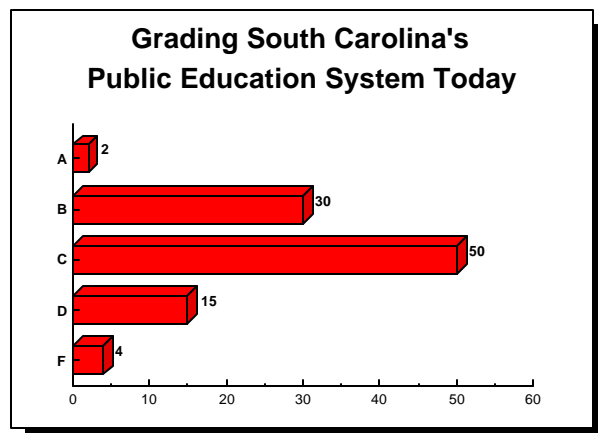
Despite their support and their personal commitment and involvement, however, many question whether the state can achieve the nine measures established to evaluate the progress toward its 2010 goal of being ranked in the top half of states nationally. Fear of inadequate funding, lack of commitment among legislators, as well as lack of commitment among targeted students and parents, were cited by many as major challenges affecting the ultimate outcome.

Still, most feel that incremental improvements are being made and will continue, and most are actively involved in the process.

### **Study Findings**

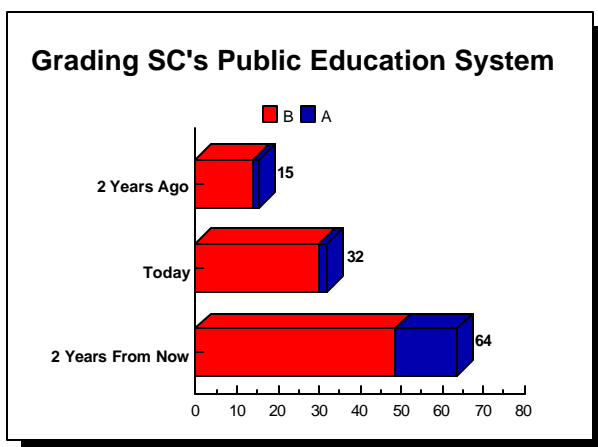
#### **General Perceptions of Education in South Carolina**

- ***Ratings identify perceived opportunity for improvement.*** Most respondents give the public education system in South Carolina a grade of "C" (50%) or "B" (30%). Only 2% give a rating of "A," with nearly one out of five (19%) giving a rating of "D" or "F."



- **Ratings also identify positive changes over the past two years and strong expectations for positive changes over the next two years.** Respondents feel the system is better today than it was two years ago and expect it to be better in two years than it is now.

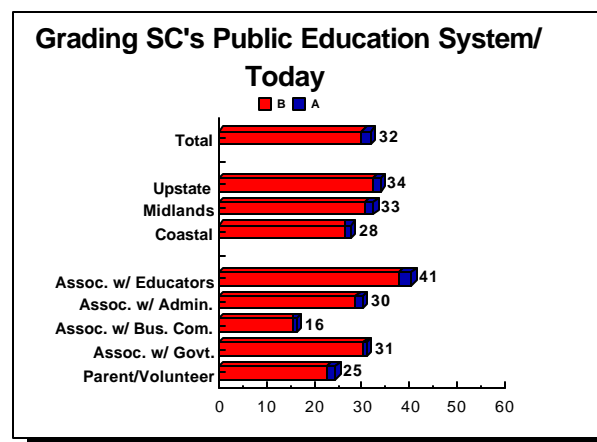
Compared to two years ago, twice as many give our schools a rating of "A" or "B" today, while twice as many again expect to be able to give a grade of "A" or "B" two years from now.



- Impressions vary somewhat by region. Leaders in the Upstate tend to be most positive about the state's public education system, while those in the Coastal area are less positive than others.

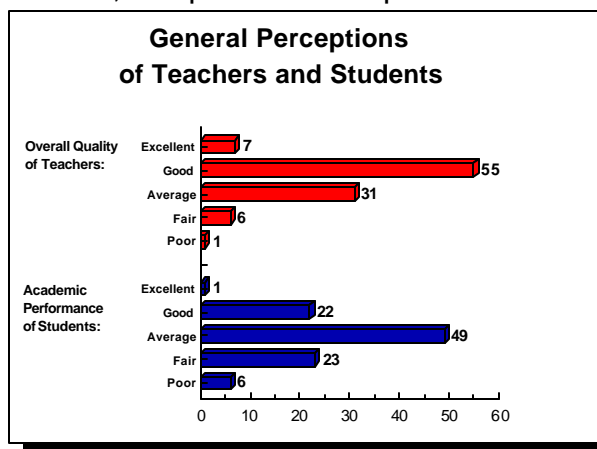
In addition, educators generally tend to give higher grades, while those outside the school

system, particularly local business leaders, are somewhat more critical. (NOTE: Leader categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Many respondents checked multiple responses, suggesting they are associated with multiple segments.)



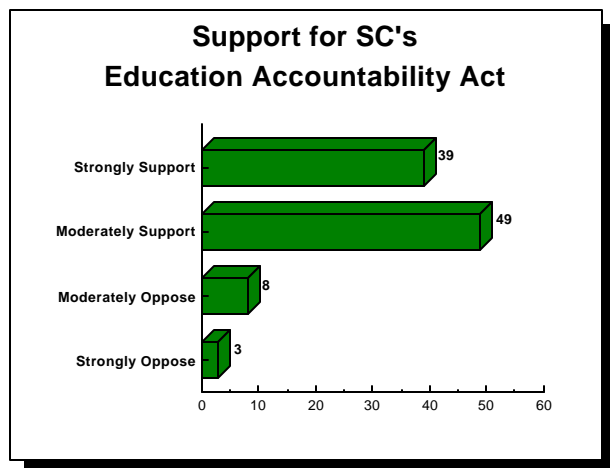
- **Teachers rated more positively than the system itself, and well above student performance.** Although relatively few (7%) give the state's teachers a rating of *excellent*, more than half (55%) rate them an above average *good*, with only 7% giving them a negative rating.

Respondents are somewhat more critical of students. Most leaders represented in the survey (49%) give the "academic performance of students in South Carolina" a rating of *average*. Fully 29% give negative ratings to students, compared to 23% positive.

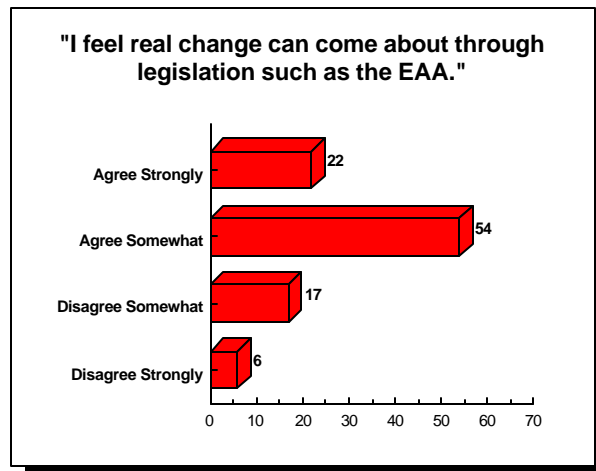
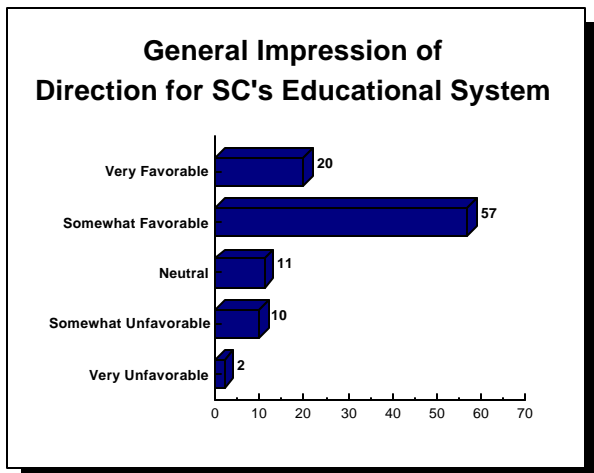


## Accountability: Positions and Expectations

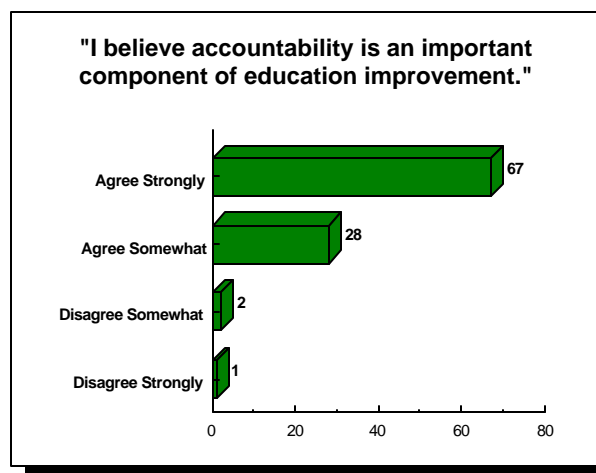
- **Leaders identify strong support for EAA and EOC's direction for education.** The overwhelming majority (88%) of study respondents identify support for South Carolina's Education Accountability Act.



- More than three out of four also identify favorable impressions of the direction proposed for South Carolina's educational system (77%) and have confidence that "real change can come about through legislation such as the EAA" (76%).



- **Support for accountability very strong.** Virtually all (95%) agree that "accountability is an important component of education improvement."

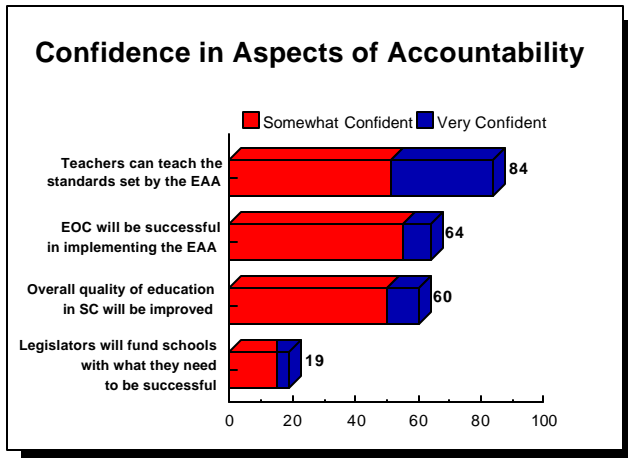


*"I am excited about our accountability standards. Although they are "painful," they are bringing consistency to the schools and better education to our children . . ."*

- **Respondents have confidence in the EAA, the EOC, and educators, but are skeptical about legislative funding.** Overall, more than four out of five (84%) have confidence that teachers can teach the standards set by the EAA. They also tend to believe that the EOC will be successful in implementing the EAA (64%) and that the overall quality of education available in South Carolina will be improved (60%).

# A MarketSearch Topline

Less than one out of five (19%), however, has confidence that legislators will fund schools with what they need to be successful.



- Unquantified comments from many respondents reinforce concerns about legislative funding and the problems it may pose for achieving the EOC's goals.

*"It is commendable that the legislature would pass laws to enact education. It is unthinkable that they would expect this to happen without adequate resources being provided."*

*"We are not going to improve schools in SC until more money is made available for education. We've got to have higher salaries to attract highly qualified teachers to get the job done. Funding is inadequate at the present time. We took two steps backward this year because of cuts in funds at the local and state level."*

*". . . Money is not the answer to all problems in education, but all laws passed federal or state must be fully funded, if programs are expected to be successful. Passing state budgets and then cutting funds appropriated to school districts is very irresponsible by our state government . . ."*

*". . . The state needs to quit mandating anything unless they are willing to fund it at 100%. Local taxpayers are being burdened too much now."*

- **Most of the nine measures are viewed as achievable, but will take longer than five years.** The nine measures established by the EOC include:

✓High school completion rates at or above national average;

✓AP and IB passage rates at or above the national average;

✓Rank in top half of states freed from drugs, weapons, violence and teacher victimization by students;

✓Rank in top half of states in percentage of students with disabilities earning a high school diploma;

✓Dropout rate in lower half of all states;

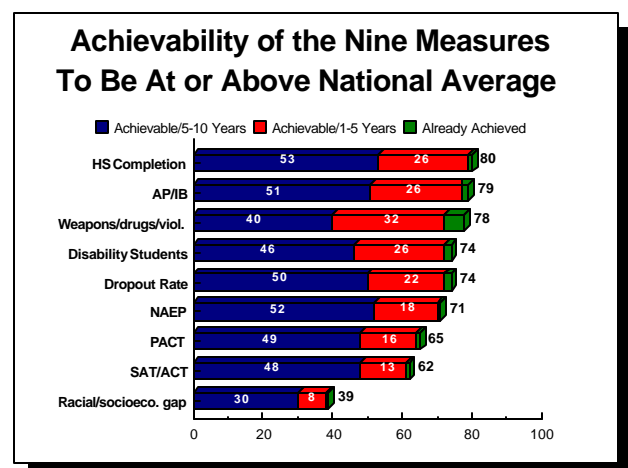
✓Rank in top half of states on NAEP exams;

✓90% of students will score at or above grade level on PACT;

✓Rank in top half of states on SAT/ACT; and

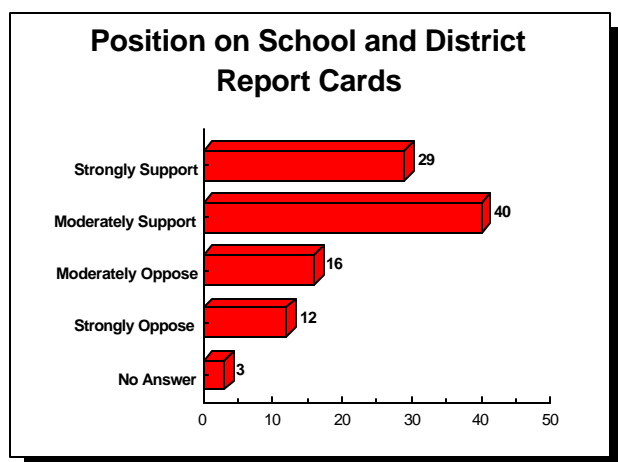
✓Eliminate achievement gaps among racial and socio-economic segments.

- Overall, most respondents believe the measures established by the EOC are achievable. On average, however, less than one out of four believes these measures can be achieved within five years.



*". . . We are on the right track, but it will take some time to turn the system around."*

- **General support for accountability measures.** More than two out of three (69%) say they support school and district report cards.



- There are, however, some concerns about school and district report cards and/or other means of measuring accountability such as the PACT.

More than three out of four (77%) agree that "school and district accountability puts too much emphasis on testing," and more than two out of five (43%) indicate that the report cards are not fair and equitable.

*"I feel that the emphasis being placed on PACT has caused our schools to teach test taking. While accountability is important, no one tool, PACT, is a true indicator of a school's ranking."*

*"Too much emphasis is placed on the PACT test. This test is measuring how well the schools are coaching and not the ability of the students."*

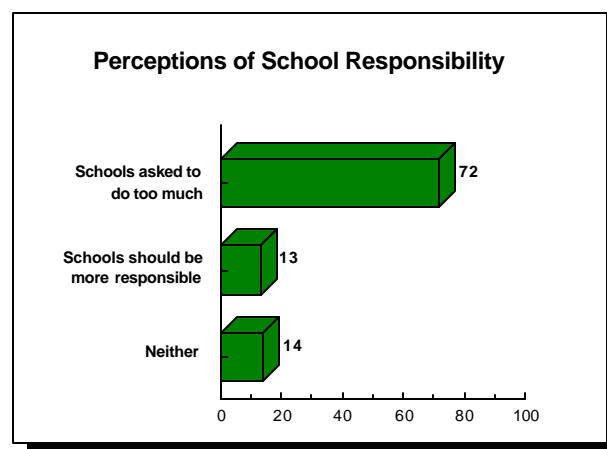
*"I feel as a parent that too much emphasis is put on teaching to take a test and that the fundamental things are being overlooked because the teachers don't have time to bring in the 'fun' aspect of school."*

*". . . The report cards will be unfair to poor and rural schools."*

## Business and Community Involvement

- **Accountability must extend beyond schools and educators.** While teachers and administrators represent the most directly accountable segment, most respondents agree that education improvement cannot be the sole responsibility of schools.

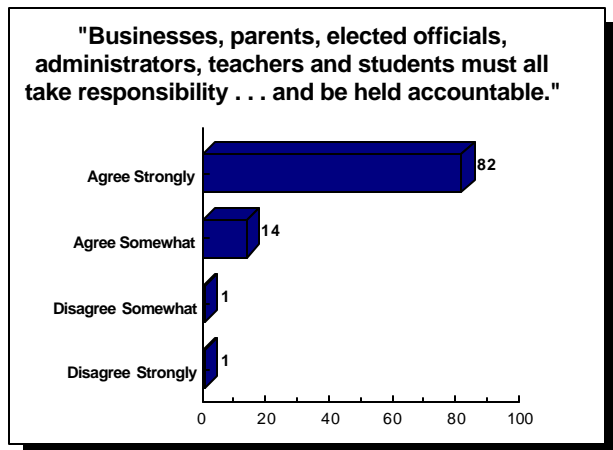
Fully 72% say that "schools are being asked to do too much."



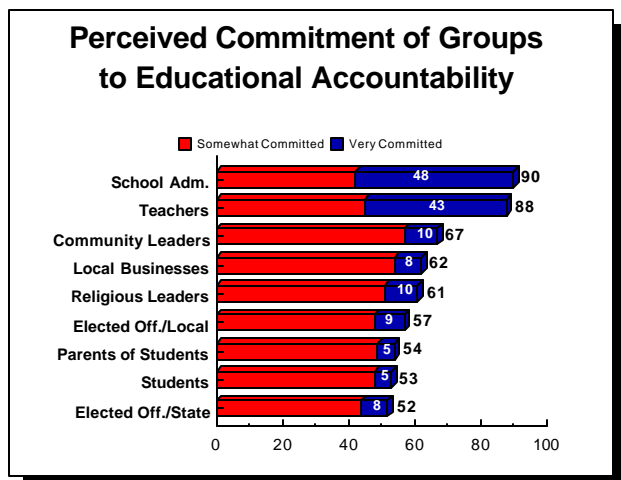
*"I'm tired of responsibility being pushed to local schools with little or no support from the state . . ."*

*"The Accountability Act and subsequent attempts to enforce have placed an inordinate amount of pressure on teachers and administrators. School employees are retiring early so there will be a teacher shortage."*

- Virtually all (96%) agree that "businesses, parents, elected officials, administrators, teachers and students must all take responsibility for making our schools better, and all must be held accountable for their success or failure."



- **Administrators and teachers viewed as most committed to accountability.** Respondents consistently feel that school administrators and teachers are committed to educational accountability. Commitment is viewed as somewhat weaker among other segments, however, particularly elected officials, parents, and students.



Comments also identify concerns and frustration regarding lack of commitment among segments such as legislators, parents, and students.

*"SC has a difficult task ahead of us. Large expenditures don't guarantee quality education, but quality education requires large expenditures. I question our real commitment."*

*"Every few years a new program or plan is implemented to improve education in SC, when the only thing needed to improve education is for the state legislature to make a financial commitment instead of lip service."*

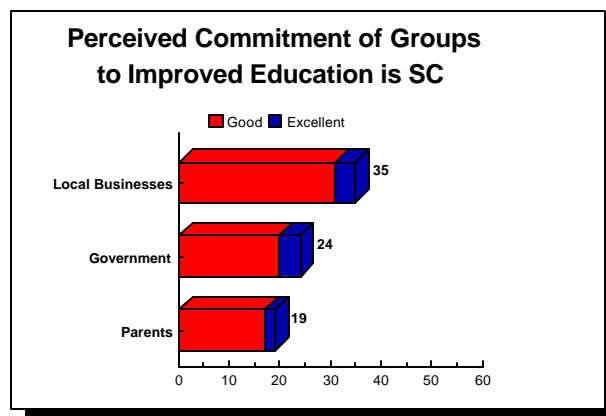
*"Lack of parental support is a huge problem in education . . ."*

*". . . Schools and teachers cannot turn around poorly performing students without parental support."*

*". . . Until we have 100% parental support and address all the social and economic problems of the state, the goals of the EOC cannot be reached."*

*"Lack of parental support is the biggest problem with our poor test scores, dropout rate, and school violence."*

- **Findings identify ample opportunities for enhancing commitment among parents, government, and business leaders.** Consistent with comments that identify concerns about the commitment of parents and government to improvement of public education in South Carolina, less than one out of four rates the commitment of either segment as *excellent* or *good*.



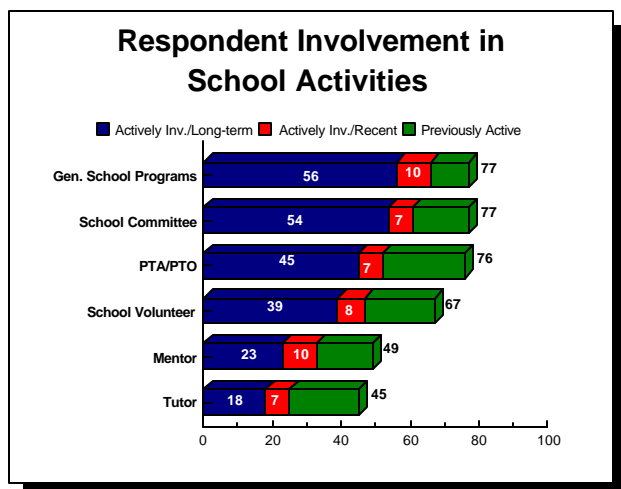
- Findings also identify opportunities for local businesses to improve their commitment. Primary opportunities for businesses to be involved include: mentoring programs, employee time off to volunteer and/or attend school activities, and financial support.



## Respondent Involvement

- **Involvement high among respondents.** Involvement with school programs, school committees, PTA/PTO, and volunteering are among the most common forms of involvement for these respondents. Overall, approximately three out of four say they are either currently or previously *actively involved* in each of these activities.

Significantly fewer are involved in mentoring or tutoring programs. Even so, however, nearly half are or have been *actively involved* in this type of activity.

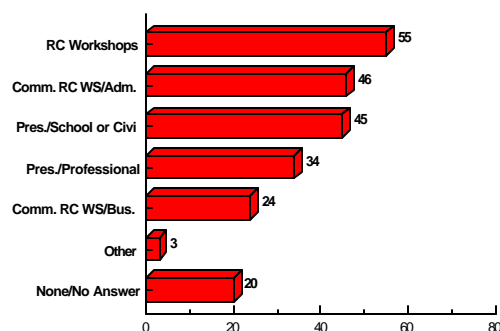


- **Volunteers especially influenced by requests -- from teachers, students, and/or administrators.** Among those who have become actively involved within the past two years, primary factors in new involvement relate to requests from teachers/staff/ administrators (39%), involvement with the PTA/PTO (24%), or the fact that their child has entered school for the first time (22%).

Direct impact of the EAA (15%) and EOC-sponsored programs (8%) has also played a role to some degree.

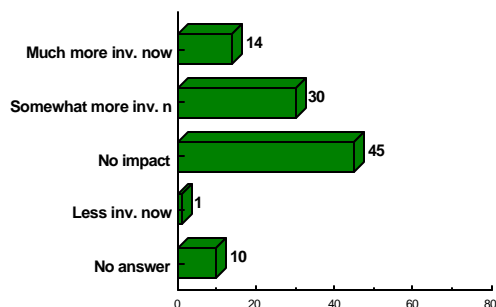
- **Participation in EOC-sponsored events and activities common among respondents.** Fully four out of five (80%) say they have attended or been involved with EOC-sponsored activities/events, and 44% say they are *more involved now* because of these activities/events.

### Respondent Attendance/Involvement in EOC-Sponsored Activities/Events



### Impact of EOC-Sponsored Events on Involvement in School/Education Act.

(among those who attended one or more EOC activities, N = 953)

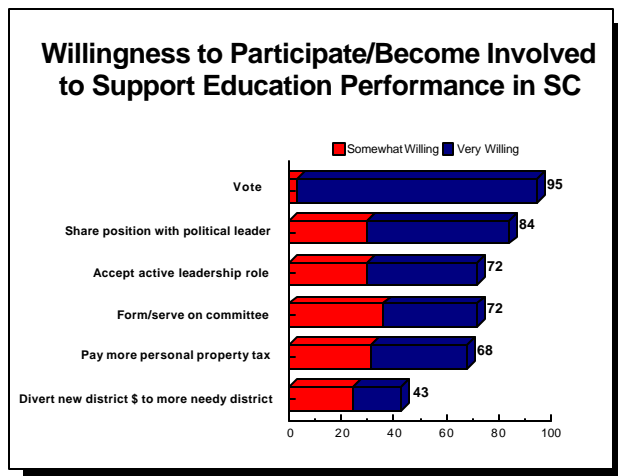


- Ways in which respondents are more involved now include: being more sensitive to issues, seeking more information, taking a leadership role within the school or community, and being a spokesman for education.

- **Respondents willing to become more involved and/or promote community involvement.** Virtually all (95%) indicate they are willing to vote to support education performance in South Carolina.

Sharing positions with political leaders is also something that the vast majority (84%) of respondents are willing to do.

Significantly fewer (42%), however, indicate they would be willing to divert new money generated in their district to more needy districts in the state.



- **Information on accountability, EOC activities, and state expenditures on education relevant to respondents.** Findings identify a very strong interest among these leaders in having access to information about state expenditures on education (94%), school and district report cards (90%) and the EOC and its activities (86%).

## Respondent Demographics

As indicated, findings in this report are based on a total sample size of 1,106. Respondents reflect a mix of teachers, administrators, school board members, parents of students, religious leaders, local business leaders, and local political leaders. Demographics of respondents follow.

### • Gender:

Male	56%
Female	42
Unspecified	2

### • Age:

Under 35	4%
35 to 44	19
45 to 54	44
55 to 64	21
65+	8
Unspecified	5

### • Region:

Upstate	37%
Midlands	31
Coastal	24

### • Type of Area:

Urban	11%
Suburban	20
Small town	32
Rural	32

### • Education Level:

High school or less	2%
Some college/tech.	12
4-year college degree	17
Post graduate work	13
Advanced degree	53

### • Ethnicity:

Caucasian	79%
African American	15
Other	1